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THE Unexplained

MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

128

Wilhelm Reich

Who discovered America?

Was Houdini psychic?

Unravelling Rennes

UFOs and angels

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THE Unexplained
MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

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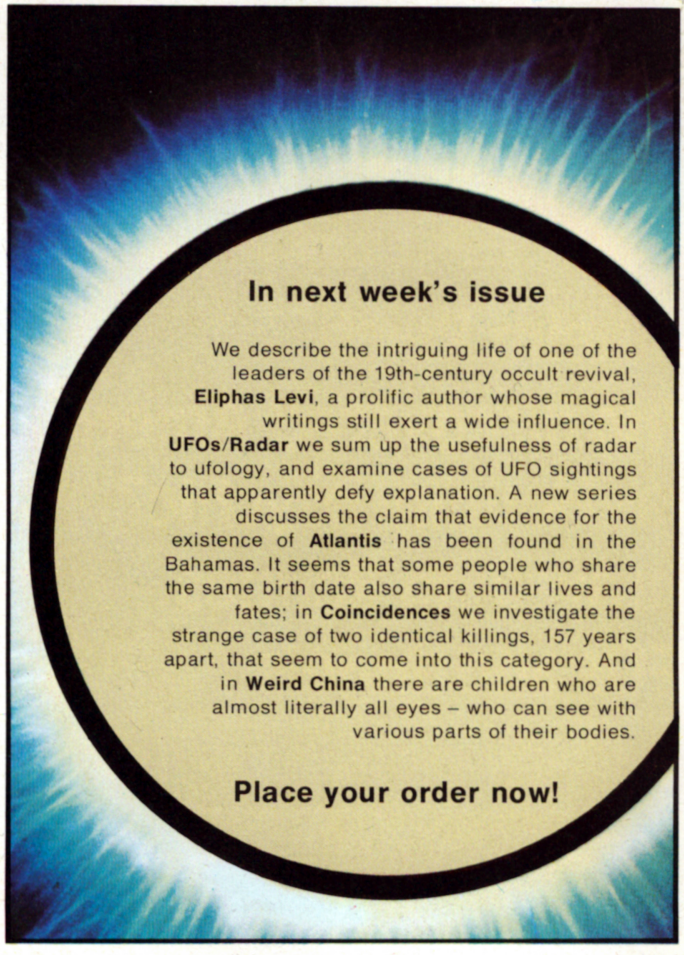

In next week's issue

We describe the intriguing life of one of the leaders of the 19th-century occult revival, **Eliphas Levi**, a prolific author whose magical writings still exert a wide influence. In **UFOs/Radar** we sum up the usefulness of radar to ufology, and examine cases of UFO sightings that apparently defy explanation. A new series discusses the claim that evidence for the existence of **Atlantis** has been found in the Bahamas. It seems that some people who share the same birth date also share similar lives and fates; in **Coincidences** we investigate the strange case of two identical killings, 157 years apart, that seem to come into this category. And in **Weird China** there are children who are almost literally all eyes – who can see with various parts of their bodies.

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Who really discovered America?

It was only after Christopher Columbus's historic voyage of 1492 that the Americas were extensively settled by Europeans. But, as ROY STEMMAN explains, the continent may have been discovered hundreds of years earlier

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, as every schoolboy knows, discovered America. Columbus, who was born in Genoa, Italy, sailed his ships – *Pinta*, *Niña* and *Santa Maria* – to the New World under the Spanish flag, reaching the island of Guanahani, which the Spaniards renamed San Salvador, in the Bahamas on 12 October 1492.

But Columbus may not have been the first to find America. 'Who discovered America?' was a question that sparked a heated but often humorous debate in the United Nations General Assembly in November 1982, after 36 nations – including Spain, Italy, South American and Caribbean countries – tabled an apparently uncontroversial motion calling for the UN to prepare for a dignified commemoration in 1992 to mark the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's discovery.

Quick to enter the fray was Noel Dorr, the delegate from the Irish Republic to the UN, who asked: 'Is it not something of an exaggeration to speak so confidently of Columbus's landing as the discovery of America? For one thing, there were indigenous inhabitants.'

There were indeed. They are thought to have arrived in America 30,000 years ago from Siberia via Alaska across a land bridge that then existed where the Bering Strait now is. The original band of Mongoloid people later split into different societies. They evolved, it has generally been believed, without outside influences.

But this, as the United Nations debate made clear, may be a much over-simplified picture of what really happened. It is highly possible that the native Americans were influenced by Irish monks who may have crossed the Atlantic in the sixth century – as Mr Dorr was eager to point out.

The Irish delegate was referring to St Brendan (see box), though he conceded that it was not yet entirely clear whether or not St Brendan, in fact, made the journey.

The Irish claim did not impress Spain's ambassador, Señor Jaime de Pinies, who declared: 'Up to this point, the only thing I have found [in the United States] from Ireland is the police force in New York City and distinguished Irishmen who belong to the American community.'

Joking apart, there were serious contenders in the battle for nations credited with the discovery of America. Hodur Helgason, Iceland's representative, was quick to bring to the UN's attention the achievement of Leif Ericsson, the Viking who, around the year 1000, discovered 'Vinland' at the end of a transatlantic voyage. It is now widely accepted that Vinland was, in fact, Newfoundland. Mr Helgason complained: 'We feel that

Previous page: the Aztec Emperor Montezuma welcomes Hernando Cortés in *The conquistadors*, a painting by Miguel Gonzales executed in 1698. Montezuma hailed Cortés as the reincarnation of the Aztecs' fair, bearded god Quetzalcoatl. It has been suggested that this legend reflects a memory of the visits of fair-skinned traders to the Americas

Right: a map of the Atlantic Ocean by Bartolomeo Pareto, dating from 1455 – a few decades before Christopher Columbus's voyage to the Americas. The map shows the legendary island of Antilla – which, according to Portuguese tradition, was peopled by Christians who had fled the advancing Moors

Below right: a 16th-century engraving of Columbus's arrival in the Americas. Was he really the first European to discover the New World?

the historical fact of Leif Ericsson's discovery is so totally ignored in the wording of the draft resolution that we cannot give it our vote.'

Visitors from the Orient?

There is plenty of evidence – some strong, some circumstantial – that America has been host to numerous foreign visitors in its past. If this is true, their arrival in North and South America must have influenced the development of the inhabitants.

There is evidence that the earliest visitors to America were Japanese and Chinese seafarers who landed on the west coast between 3000 BC and 2500 BC. The evidence for Japanese visitors is strong and comes in the form of a case of pottery, nearly 5000 years old, that was found on the Valdivian coast of Ecuador. It is incised and decorated in the same style as pottery from the Jomon area of Japan.

How did it get there? One hypothesis is that a Japanese fishing vessel was caught in a storm and then drifted the 8000 miles (13,000 kilometres) to the north-west coast of South America. The fishermen could have kept alive, through the seven months or more during which their boat would have drifted, by eating fish and drinking rainwater.

Evidence for the Chinese connection may not be as strong – but Robert von Heine-Geldern, an Austrian ethnologist, believes the Chinese exerted a very strong influence on the development of civilisation in central America and Peru. There is a Chinese classic, the *Shan Hai King*, dated about 2250 BC, which contains what appears to be an accurate description of the Grand Canyon.

While seaborne explorers or lost fishermen may have been approaching the Americas across the Pacific, the Atlantic was almost certainly bringing visitors to the east coast. The American archaeologist Alice B. Kehoe has drawn attention to 'oddities' in the north-east region of North America that suggest the existence of early transatlantic trade routes.

The earliest specimens of woodworking tools and fishing gear are found in the Great Lakes area of Canada and the United States dating from 2500 BC; ground slate knives, of a slightly later date and similar design, have been found in the Baltic countries. Dr Kehoe suggests that this may have been due to cod fishermen who strayed across the Atlantic and returned with the more efficient means of gutting their catch, learned from the original inhabitants of North America.

Further evidence of links between America and Europe are to be found in pottery in America dating from around 1000 BC. This closely matches Baltic pottery of the same age.

All too often, in assessing the likely influence of other civilisations on a country, the

The Irish connection

A 9th-century chronicle, *Navigatio Brendani* – 'The voyage of St Brendan' – tells of the attempt of a 6th-century Irish monk to find the Christian Utopia that he believed lay somewhere to the west of Ireland. Sailing from the monastery of Tralee, on the west coast of Ireland, he apparently eventually found it – or something like it. But what was it? The descriptions in *Navigatio Brendani* have suggested to some scholars that he reached the Canary Islands, while others believe he reached Greenland. The island he found, which was 'higher than the sky [and] seemed to be made of pure crystal', could equally well have been an iceberg. And another island, with a mountain 'clear of clouds, vomiting forth flames sky-high and then sucking them back upon itself, so that the whole mass of rock, right down to the sea level, glowed like a pyre', appears to have been a volcano. It seems quite possible that St Brendan may have crossed the Atlantic by way of volcanic Iceland, and travelled on to his Utopia – the New World – 10 centuries before Columbus.

Whatever the truth of the matter, St Brendan's Island appears in the western Atlantic on many 17th- and 18th-century maps. The Portuguese even claimed sovereignty over the island, and plots of land were sold to noble families. Despite attempts, financed in their embarrassment by the Portuguese, to find their mythical island, its exact location remains unknown.

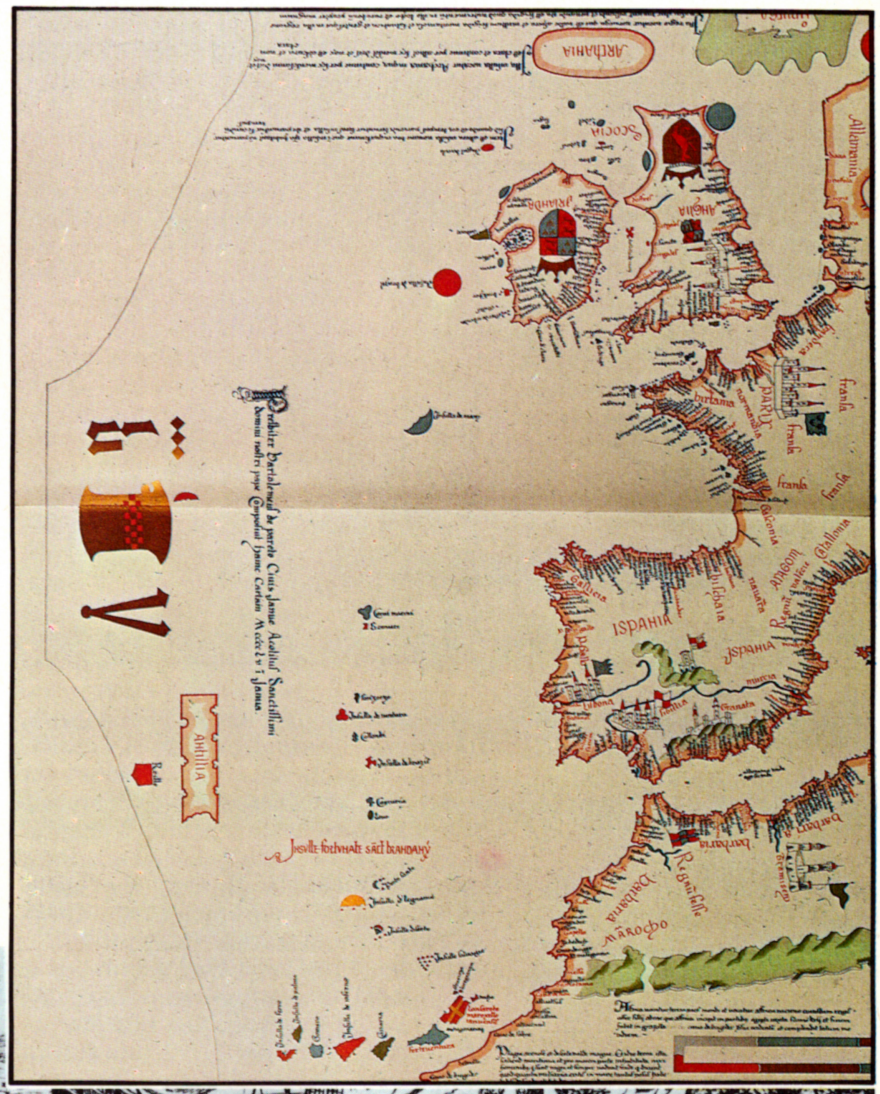
An illustration from *Navigatio Brendani*. In the ninth year of their voyage, the monks – sailing in a tiny rudderless boat steered by a single oar – are encircled by a huge fish that holds its tail in its mouth

experts look for visits across land bridges. In fact, it is very probable that ancient mariners were capable of making long journeys and were familiar with navigation techniques that make trade and cultural links between continents seem far from impossible.

As Thor Heyerdahl's *Ra* expeditions showed, a combination of wind and current could take a papyrus raft from the African coast to America 'whether the crew wanted it or not'. Francis Hitching, in his book *World atlas of mysteries*, points out that some historians believe that an influx of Egyptian, Negro, Jewish and Chinese immigrants were together responsible for the sudden rise of the Olmec civilisation in Mexico around 1200 BC. The seafaring Phoenicians are another group of people credited with having traded with America around 1000 BC, according to some interpretations of texts by Plato and Diodorus Siculus.

One puzzle that certainly suggests contact with other races is the existence in the Americas of sculpted heads dating from 1500 BC to AD 1500 that depict bearded men of Jewish appearance – American Indians are beardless.

Indeed, as Hitching points out, the conquistador Hernando Cortés was left in no doubt that someone had preceded him when he landed in Mexico in AD 1519. The Aztec Emperor Montezuma invited him to court where he was greeted as the reincarnation of

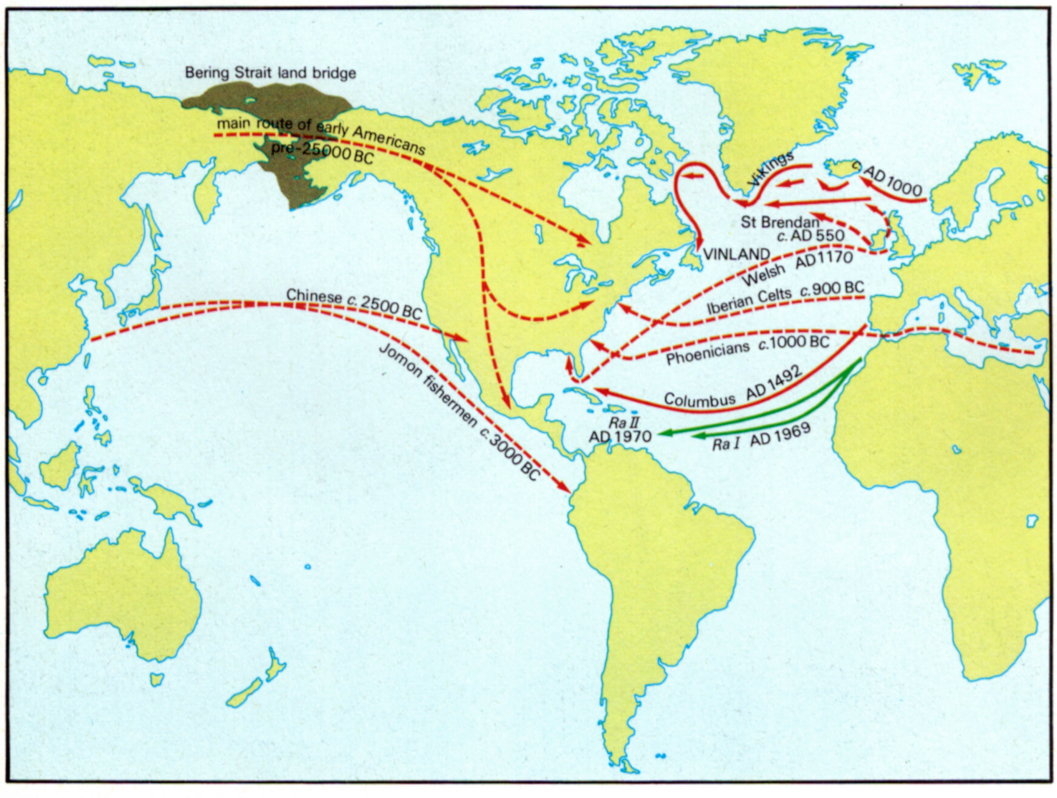


The Vinland Map, a medieval chart showing Iceland, Greenland – and Vinlanda Insula, or Vinland (top left). The mythical Fortunate Islands and St Brendan's Island, however, are also marked

The land of wine

The *History of the archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, by Adam of Bremen, which dates from 1075, describes the lands of the northern Atlantic known to the Scandinavians at the time. Writing of a conversation with their king, Adam says: 'He spoke also of yet another island of the many found in that ocean. It is called Vinland because vines producing excellent wines grow there.'

Vinland was the name given, probably by Leif Ericsson, to a new land he discovered in the north Atlantic around AD 1000. Ericsson's expedition was followed by a colonising party who were excited by the prospect of an abundant supply of 'wine berries'; but it seems they were disappointed, for in the third year of the colonising expedition they complained that the wine banquets that had been promised them had not taken place. Confirmation that Norsemen had visited the New World – however briefly – came in 1963, when the ruins of a Norse settlement were discovered at the northernmost tip of Newfoundland.



Left: a map of the Americas, showing the route taken by Christopher Columbus in 1492, together with other routes that, it has been proposed by historians, may have been taken by other navigators. The routes taken by Thor Heyerdahl in 1969 and 1970 from Morocco to South America using raft-ships of papyrus reeds are also indicated; these expeditions were designed to test the theory that ancient peoples of the Mediterranean could have crossed the Atlantic and brought cultural ideas to the natives of Mexico and Peru

the Aztecs' fair, bearded god Quetzalcoatl, who had brought civilisation 'from the sunrise' then left, promising to return (see page 456).

'Why,' Hitching asks, 'should a dark-skinned, beardless people worship a fair, bearded deity unless something of this sort had once been the living focus of their religious life?'

Quite apart from the folklore of the Americas and the archaeological finds that appear to have originated in other cultures, there are other archaeological mysteries of much greater proportions. There is, for instance, the evidence for the civilisation that flourished along the Mississippi River – in the fertile area now known as American Bottom – about 1200 years ago. Its capital was Cahokia, with a quarter of a million residents, and it flourished for 500 years. This civilisation is believed to have equalled if not surpassed the great Indian cultures of Mexico and South America.

Writing about this lost civilisation in *Fate* magazine in November 1982, Jim Miles observed:

> How it began and why the ancient civilisation dispersed remain mysteries, but extensive ongoing study for the last quarter-century has uncovered the Cahokians' art, industry, massive mound construction and sophisticated astronomical knowledge.

What has surprised the investigators is the Cahokians' extraordinary knowledge of mathematics at a level never before encountered in any so-called primitive society.

Among the remains of the Cahokians is the most extravagant ancient American grave ever discovered. The skeleton of someone believed to have been a ruler was unearthed in a grave together with the remains of six other people – who were probably sacrificed to accompany him to the next world. The chief had been laid to rest on robes made of 20,000 pearls.

To describe the Cahokians as a lost civilisation would be wrong: they were visited in the 16th and 18th centuries by explorers who described their barbaric customs and the pyramid-style mounds that were a prominent feature of their settlements. What is lost is a satisfactory explanation of the influences that created the Cahokian culture. The truth is that the civilisation of the so-called 'New World' may be far older than we suspect and – as the United Nations General Assembly discovered – many nations may be justified in claiming that *they* discovered the Americas.

On page 2586: archaeological evidence suggests a revision of the dating of prehistory

Below: a number of grass-covered mounds such as these are all that is left of the city of Cahokia, close to Collinsville, in Illinois, USA. At its peak in the 13th century, the settlement covered an area of around 6 square miles (16 square kilometres), and some estimates have put its population as high as a quarter of a million. Archaeological investigations have revealed that the city appears to have been organised according to a formal plan, with ceremonial mounds, open squares, market places, workshop areas, burial grounds – where the graves included those of human sacrifices – and segregated residential areas. When Cahokia was founded in the eighth century, its inhabitants were largely agricultural workers; but as the city flourished, labour became more specialised and trade developed. The finds at Cahokia indicate a level of culture unknown elsewhere in the United States; among them are finely wrought arrow-heads (left) and intricately carved stone tablets (below left)

Encounters with angels

Ufologists are used to frustration and disappointment in their investigations of mystery objects in the skies – even when they have the benefit of radar evidence. For, as JENNY RANDLES explains, what is seen on the radar screen can rarely be interpreted without additional eyewitness evidence

IN THE WINTER of 1979 to 1980 the Manchester UFO Research Association (MUFORA) were faced with a problem. The hilly terrain of the Rossendale Valley, about 20 miles (30 kilometres) north of Manchester, had been providing dozens of UFO observations. Mostly these referred to an orange light in the sky, which became known as the 'Rossendale anomaly'.

The group had excellent relations with local airport authorities – a great advantage in the hunt for a solution to the Rossendale mystery. The chief suspicion was that the 'anomaly' must be an aircraft, as it appeared to a regular time schedule – behaviour most untypical of UFOs. Yet MUFORA investigators had seen the object and remained puzzled as to its nature. What was more, rapid checks after these sightings had brought a response from the airport that no air traffic was on their radar screens in that particular area.

MUFORA considered various possibilities. It could be, for example, that the presence of the hills would act as a filter. If an aircraft were low enough over the hills, its blip could blend into the radar return from them. It could even be expunged from the screen by its proximity to a non-moving target, if the moving target indicator were to be switched on (see page 2532).

Eventually it was decided to attempt an experiment. MUFORA members positioned themselves at two sites in the Rossendale hills and kept alert for the anomaly. They did not see the usual object. But a bright light *was* seen by all the observers. They took it to be an aircraft, despite a curious 'wiggle' in its motion, to which they could attest independently. They had with them a radio tuned to civilian air traffic control frequencies: it suggested that an aircraft might well be in the location in which this light appeared. The time was precisely that at which the anomaly was most active – between 1 and 2 a.m.

Meanwhile Peter Warrington, a member of the group and a UFO radar specialist, was some miles away, at a radar establishment that had extensive facilities with which all air traffic over the Rossendale hills could be seen and logged. Warrington's task was to watch a radar screen for some hours, under skilled supervision, and make a full record of any objects that the teams in the hills might see. But when the data were compared in the cold light of morning it was discovered that nothing had been logged by Warrington that correlated with the phenomenon seen by the observers.

What does this mean? Did the teams observe a UFO that was invisible to radar? This would not be the first time that the Rossendale anomaly had failed to show up on radar, in circumstances in which it seemed unlikely that a radar blip would be masked by the hills' radar trace. The MUFORA observers were convinced that the object they saw was at some distance above and to the side of the hill line – making it unlikely that a radar return from it would be obscured in this way.

Below: an air traffic controller watches a radar screen. At some airports, when the workload permits, radar operators are willing to search for UFOs in response to telephone calls from witnesses made while the sighting is in progress. One difficulty in trying to find a reported object in this way is that the witness can usually report only its bearing from his position – not its distance

Below: Peter Warrington, a colleague of Jenny Randles, helped to investigate the mystery light that was seen near Rossendale, Lancashire

However, Peter Warrington points out that the UFO evaluation is a risky one. He argues that the pressure of work in the radar establishment (even at that hour of the night) was such that it was quite possible that an overflying aircraft might have been missed. He could not guarantee that, just because he logged no radar return, there was no relevant blip among the many that were on the screen at any given moment. In their subsequent evaluation of this experiment, MUFORA stated that, primarily because what was seen was consistent with an aircraft (possibly seen under unusual atmospheric conditions), the likeliest conclusion was that it was just that, and its radar return had somehow been missed.

Here there were ideal circumstances for the identification of a UFO: several independent observers seeing an object, with simultaneous radar observation by means of some

of the best facilities available, under the auspices of a most experienced ufologist. And yet no conclusive statement could be made. The object seen might or might not have been an aircraft. All the problems of using radar to confirm a visual sighting are thrown into sharp relief by the Rossendale experiment.

The term 'angel' is used by radar operators for a moving radar return that is not readily identified but appears to be caused by a real object – not by some defect in the equipment. The word was chosen because these objects appear to have the ability to fly and to appear, disappear and reappear at will. Some UFO enthusiasts believe that many angels seen on radarscopes are in fact alien spacecraft performing their marvellous feats. The accepted scientific view is that they are the effects of moving pockets of non-standard air or other atmospheric anomalies.

Radar operators at all airports are well aware of the existence of angels. They confront them very often, and inexperienced operators are sometimes fooled by them. Peter Warrington and the author, while researching radar cases for a book, were informed of one occasion where an operator became convinced that an angel was a real object and warned an approaching aircraft. The pilot could see no sign of this 'UFO' – and promptly flew straight through it! Evidently this particular angel was nothing more substantial than non-standard air.

Gordon Thayer, an American scientist, took part in the infamous Colorado University project under the directorship of the renowned physicist Dr Edward U. Condon. This extensive study, with financial support from the United States government, published a 1000-page report in 1969. It looked at over 30 radar-visual cases, Thayer's special interest, and concluded that over half of them were angels caused by atmospheric effects.

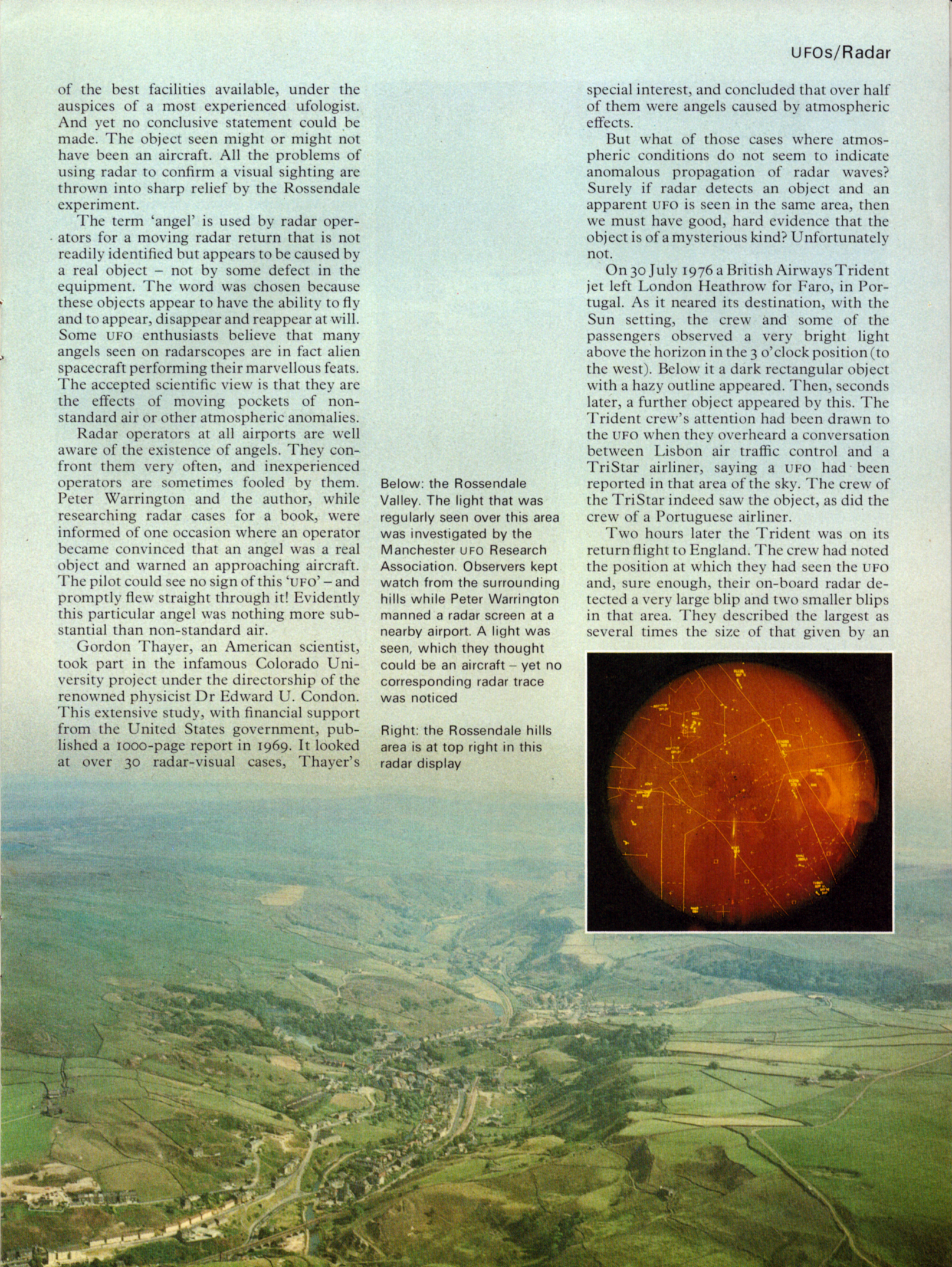
But what of those cases where atmospheric conditions do not seem to indicate anomalous propagation of radar waves? Surely if radar detects an object and an apparent UFO is seen in the same area, then we must have good, hard evidence that the object is of a mysterious kind? Unfortunately not.

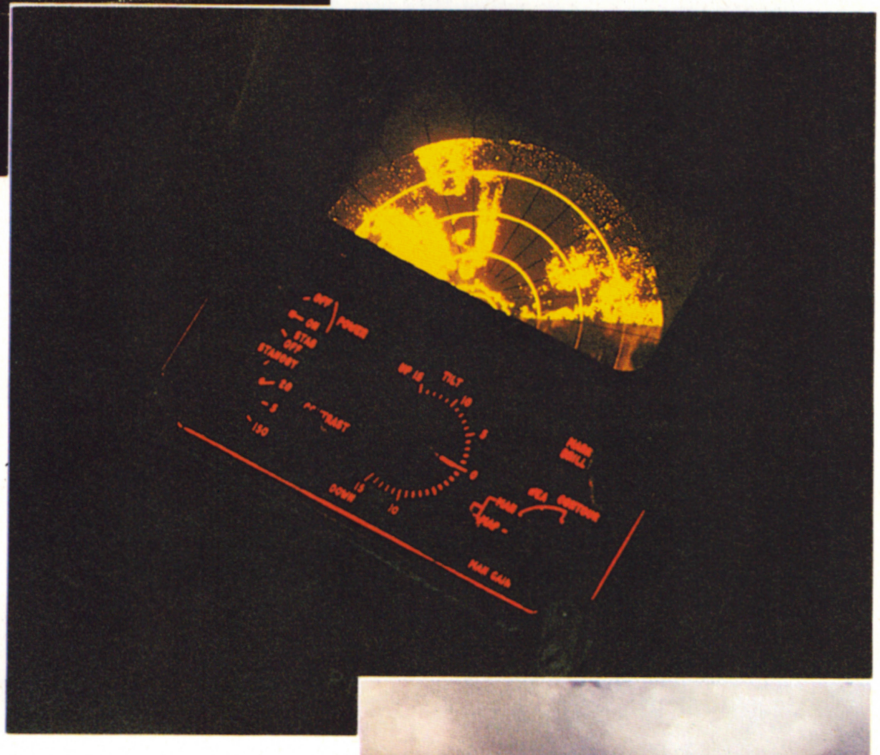
On 30 July 1976 a British Airways Trident jet left London Heathrow for Faro, in Portugal. As it neared its destination, with the Sun setting, the crew and some of the passengers observed a very bright light above the horizon in the 3 o'clock position (to the west). Below it a dark rectangular object with a hazy outline appeared. Then, seconds later, a further object appeared by this. The Trident crew's attention had been drawn to the UFO when they overheard a conversation between Lisbon air traffic control and a TriStar airliner, saying a UFO had been reported in that area of the sky. The crew of the TriStar indeed saw the object, as did the crew of a Portuguese airliner.

Two hours later the Trident was on its return flight to England. The crew had noted the position at which they had seen the UFO and, sure enough, their on-board radar detected a very large blip and two smaller blips in that area. They described the largest as several times the size of that given by an

Below: the Rossendale Valley. The light that was regularly seen over this area was investigated by the Manchester UFO Research Association. Observers kept watch from the surrounding hills while Peter Warrington manned a radar screen at a nearby airport. A light was seen, which they thought could be an aircraft – yet no corresponding radar trace was noticed

Right: the Rossendale hills area is at top right in this radar display





A Trident airliner like this one (top) was involved in a radar-visual UFO incident in July 1976, while *en route* from London to Faro, Portugal. On the outward bound trip the UFO was seen as a bright light with a darker object beneath it. On the return trip the aircraft's forward-scanning onboard radar (above) showed a group of blips in the approximate area of the visible object. Ufologists finally decided that the most likely candidate for the object was a high-altitude research balloon (right), which had been launched from Sicily on a transatlantic flight

ocean-going super-tanker. Peering out into the sky, now quite dark, they failed to see anything corresponding to these returns.

UFO investigators were alerted to this case very quickly, thanks to the aircraft's captain, who contacted Omar Fowler and his Surrey Investigation Group into Aerial Phenomena. They published a report on the story in the British journal *Flying Saucer Review*. Oddly, the media did not pick up the story for many months; then suddenly it was elevated to the status of national news. The affair was hailed as a modern classic radar-visual case. But diligent work by British ufologists began to uncover a conventional explanation.

Philip Taylor, a scientist at the Royal Greenwich Observatory and a co-ordinator for the British UFO Research Association, followed up a lead that looked very promising. It appeared that a high-altitude experimental balloon had been launched over the Mediterranean by a team of researchers on 29 July under the auspices of the British Science Research Council. Dr David Ramsden, a physicist from Southampton University, pointed out that its probable flight path from the launch at Trapani, Sicily, to its intended destination in the United States would take it across Portugal, on or about 30 July.

Taylor obtained data from Italian and Spanish radar: they included two confirmed positions of the balloon on 30 July. From these, and from wind speed and direction, its position at the time of the visual sighting was easy to calculate. The predicted location of the balloon agreed extremely well with the position of the object seen by the aircrews. Taylor reached the very reasonable conclusion that the Trident sighting was explicable in terms of sunlight reflected from this unusually large and high-flying balloon (it was in fact well over 300 feet [90 metres] in diameter).

But what of the radar blips seen on the return flight? Peter Warrington worked independently on these. While it is possible that they refer to the balloon, this is rather unlikely in the circumstances. The blip sizes implied that the objects creating them were not just big, but impossibly big – miles across, in fact. The radar set's manufacturers were of the opinion that the blips could not have been caused by an aerial target.

It is very feasible that the blips were the product of *ground* returns, probably from the Pyrenees. The mistake was an easy one to make, especially as the crew were expecting to see something. As Peter Warrington points out: 'It is not surprising that they did

not visually confirm the radar reading. Perhaps, had they looked down instead of up, they would have done so.'

This case was a triumph for the hard-working investigators, showing that not all ufologists are set on believing everything they hear – at all costs!

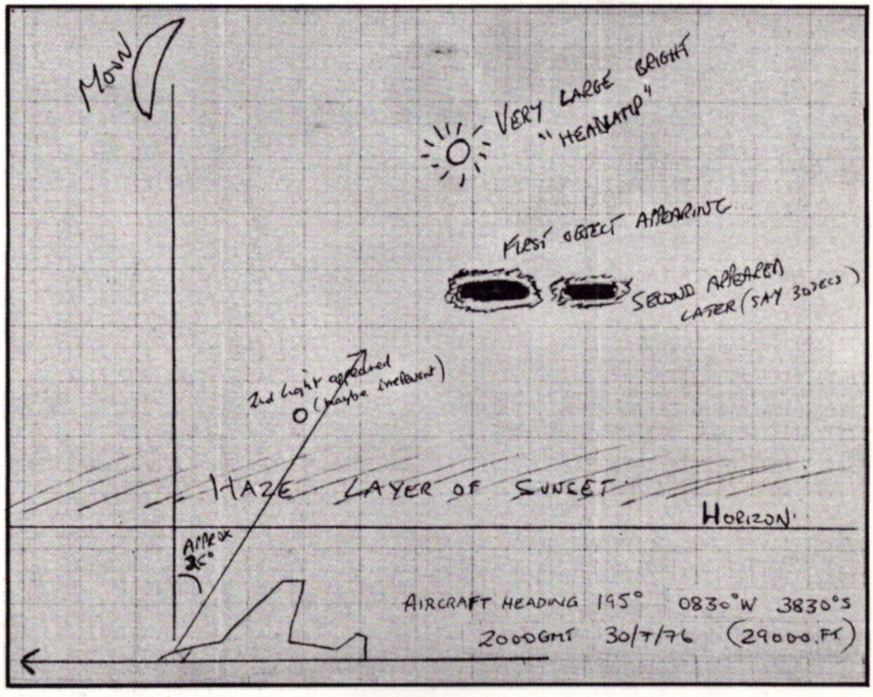
Unfortunately, radar cases have not always been examined in this way. Here is an example that is still widely quoted in UFO books. The case occurred on 30 November 1973, at about 7 p.m. A radar operator at Turin airport in Italy observed a target nearby. He alerted aircraft in the vicinity, and two Alitalia DC-9 jets observed a UFO, in the form of a scintillating light. The pilot of a Piper light aircraft even tried to intercept the object, but it made fantastic 'to and fro' movements and then disappeared into the distance. He had to give up the chase, being quite unable to catch up with the object. On the ground, meanwhile, the radar operator and several other witnesses also saw a light in the right direction. (See page 98.)

However, it is easy to become suspicious about this case when a statement of the radar operator is considered: 'Visually it looked to me much like a star.' The colour scintillations are suggestive of this, and none of the other visual descriptions refer to anything that could not be regarded as a star or planet seen under exceptional conditions. Even the 'to and fro' motions would be possible if there were atmospheric turbulence, or perhaps an inversion layer (a layer of warm air lying over cooler air) near the horizon. This would also explain why the light aircraft did not catch up with it!

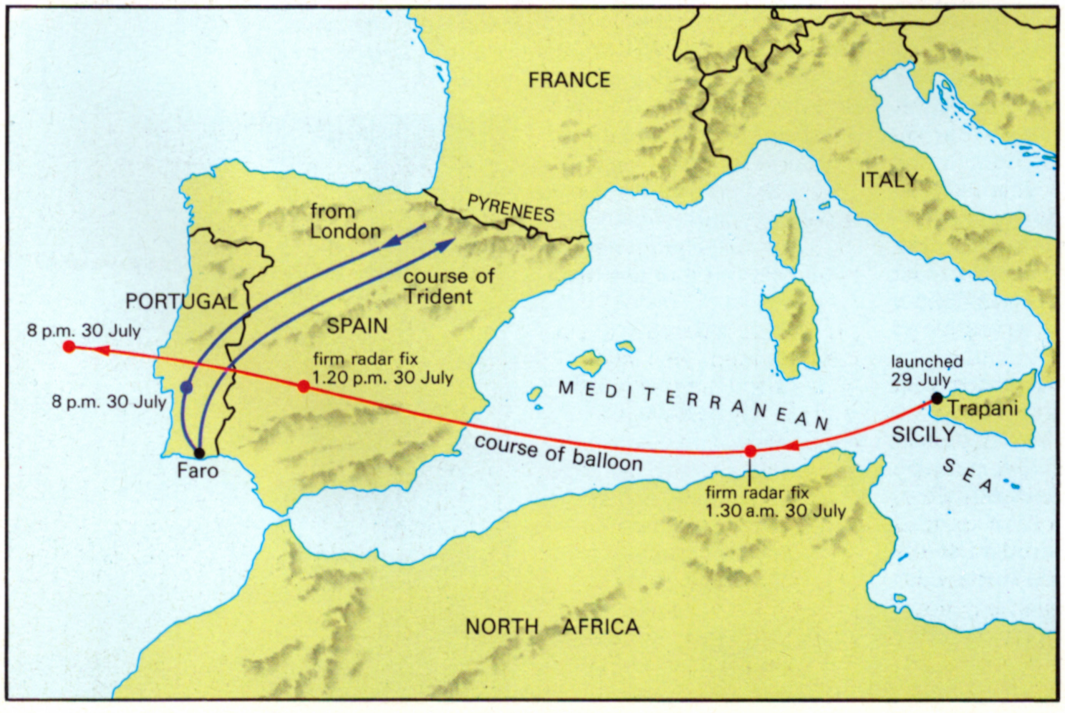
In fact the planet Venus, being low on the horizon at the time, seems to fit the bill here very neatly. Venus should have been in plain view in addition to the UFO and yet no witness or investigator refers to it. One is justified in regarding it as a likely candidate. If there were an inversion layer present as well, it could coincidentally have produced a radar angel in the same part of the sky.

It seems probable that this radar-visual sighting was caused by the coincidental occurrence of two different and misinterpreted stimuli. The fact that UFO reports had attracted attention in Italy during the weeks before this suggests a reason why the event was interpreted in the way it was, and why it was then afforded widespread media coverage.

Radar-visual cases that defy explanation are discussed on page 2578



Above: a sketch made by the captain of the Trident airliner. The dark objects could conceivably, he said, have been 'contrails' (condensation trails made by aircraft) but he thought this unlikely since the air was dry and no other trails were being produced by aircraft at the time. He described the light as 'rather like an enormous headlamp in the sky. It was not a star, planet or satellite . . .'



Left: the paths of the Trident and of the balloon launched the previous day. All times are GMT. The most probable position of the balloon at the time of the sighting agrees well with the UFO's actual position

Left: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle did not bring Sherlock Holmes's rapier-like logic to his psychic investigations, especially in his dealings with Houdini (below, with a milk churn full of water from which he is about to escape). Doyle believed that Houdini's 'magical' feats were impossible to achieve merely by sleight of hand or ingenious muscle control. And even when Houdini explained how he performed his tricks, Doyle still maintained that the magician was psychic

Was Houdini psychic?

To his audiences Houdini was a superman; to mediums, a scourge – and to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle he was a psychic who denied his strange gifts. BRIAN INGLIS looks at the real nature of the Houdini enigma

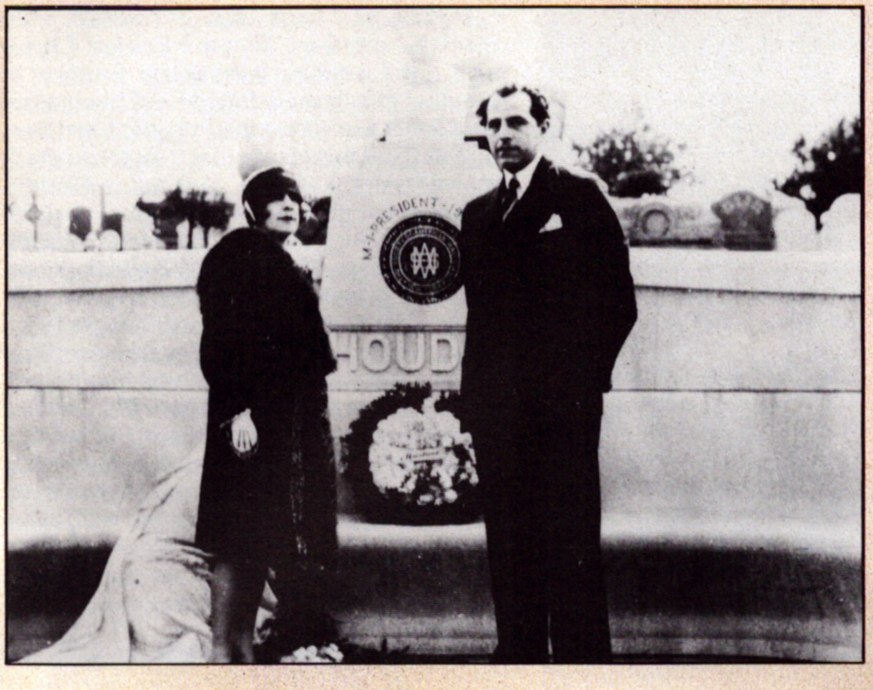
'WHO WAS the greatest medium-baiter of modern times?' Sir Arthur Conan Doyle asked in *The edge of the unknown*, published not long before his death in 1930: 'Undoubtedly Houdini. Who was the greatest physical medium of modern times? There are some who would be inclined to give the same answer.'

The notion that Houdini worked *real* magic, rather than sleight-of-hand, seemed preposterous to most of those who knew him, especially in view of his frequent and savage attacks on mediums who purported to be able to create materialisations, or move objects at a distance by their powers of psychokinesis. Even Conan Doyle had to admit that he could not prove that Houdini was in fact using psychic powers. But circumstantial evidence may often be very strong, and Doyle proceeded to present it.

Doyle was not, however, disputing that Houdini was 'a very skilful conjurer'. What marked him out, however, from his fellow conjurers was not his remarkable feats as an escapologist – extricating himself from ropes, chains and padlocks while in a sealed coffin suspended in the air or dunked in the sea, and so on – but the sheer speed with which he was able to perform them and, even more, the fact that he was able to do them, time and again, when the slightest slip would almost certainly have meant injury or even death. Many conjurers have since sought to explain Houdini's tricks: although many have claimed to repeat the more dangerous feats of 'the legendary Houdini', not a single one has done so.

Some of the alleged evidence that Houdini was a medium came from mediums; some from people who knew him; and some from incidents in his life that can be explained away as chance, but may actually have been psychic.

The first category, perhaps the weakest, largely consists of stories such as that told by Hewart Mackenzie in his *Spirit intercourse* (1916). Mackenzie claimed that Houdini actually dematerialised himself during one of his performances: Houdini had been submerged under water in a locked container on stage, but reappeared, dripping, a mere minute and a half later from a different part



of the stage. Mackenzie elaborated:

> While the author stood near the tank during the dematerialisation process a great loss of physical energy was felt by him, such as is usually felt by sitters in materialising seances who have a good stock of vital energy, as in such phenomena a large amount of energy is required.

Perhaps Houdini had indeed drawn upon psychic energy, but almost certainly not in order to dematerialise: he may simply have been concentrating all his faculties on the accomplishment of his trick. And there is evidence that he was aware of this. An English journalist, H. L. Adam, described how, before a performance, 'while Houdini was waiting at the side of the stage ready for his "turn", he sat in his chair, threw his head back, closed his eyes, and appeared plunged in the profoundest meditations.' Houdini had been talking to Adam, when he suddenly broke off and sank into this state. Then, after about 10 minutes, 'he continued his conversation with me as though nothing had intervened.'

Houdini himself made no secret of his skilful breath control. In 1926, a few months before his death, he took up a challenge to remain under water in a sealed container for over an hour, with no air intake – and he succeeded. His method, he told the press, was to take deep breaths before the box was closed, and then relax, breathing rhythmically.

His fellow conjurers simply did not believe him. One of them, Joseph Rinn, was sure that there must be a false bottom to the container, or that Houdini had somehow managed to extract air from the emergency line that was attached to it. Irritated, Houdini insisted that he had given the press the true explanation: there was no gimmick.

He also insisted that neither was he 'in a cataleptic state' – a sly reference to the 'Egyptian miracle man', Rahman Bey (see page 2352), who also allowed himself to be sealed up in a container, as well as lying on beds of nails and performing other feats ordinarily associated with Indian fakirs. What Houdini did not know, however, was that the deep breathing exercises he indulged in are, in fact, one of the traditional methods of inducing a trance state; they are also widely used in yoga, but because yoga in those days was classified as an 'occult' practice, he could not risk his reputation by admitting he employed it.

But Houdini was prepared to admit freely that he had an 'inner voice' – which, he told Doyle, was 'independent of his own reason or judgment' and told him what he could and could not do, adding that: 'so long as he obeyed the voice he was assured of safety.' To Doyle, the voice was a psychic manifestation, but not to Houdini, who simply

Above: Houdini's widow Bess, with the famous magician Donninger, standing by Houdini's grave shortly after his death in 1926. The great escapologist had planned – if it were possible – to free himself from the bonds of death long enough to communicate a pre-arranged code to his widow at seances held regularly on the anniversary of his death. Yet, controversial to the last, there are conflicting reports as to the outcome of this plan

Right: J. Malcolm Bird, the secretary of the *Scientific American*'s committee for the investigation of the medium 'Margery', who dared to take issue with Houdini over her authenticity. But, ruthless as ever, Houdini managed to 'prove' her a fraud – using manifestly unethical means

Left: Professor Gilbert Murray. His homely telepathic games were seized upon by Houdini, who boasted of amazing success in reproducing them – using most cunning trickery

regarded its promptings as 'lucky breaks'.

Houdini was occasionally involved in seances at which inexplicable phenomena occurred; and he did not even attempt to deny the fact, though he ordinarily claimed that there must have been some 'natural explanation'. At a table-turning seance in a Long Island country house, the home of the New York lawyer Bernard Ernst, a table levitated. Ernst at first assumed that this was Houdini rising to the occasion, but later realised, after due consideration, that Houdini could not have used trickery; and Houdini himself repudiated the charge. This was not as improbable as it may sound, in view of Houdini's detestation of Spiritualism: he did not care to be associated with it in any way. Even the great conjurer Maskelyne (who, like Houdini, rejected Spiritualism and endlessly satirised mediumship in his act) made an exception for 'table-turning' because he happened to have had first-hand experience that it was genuine.

'You are a medium!'

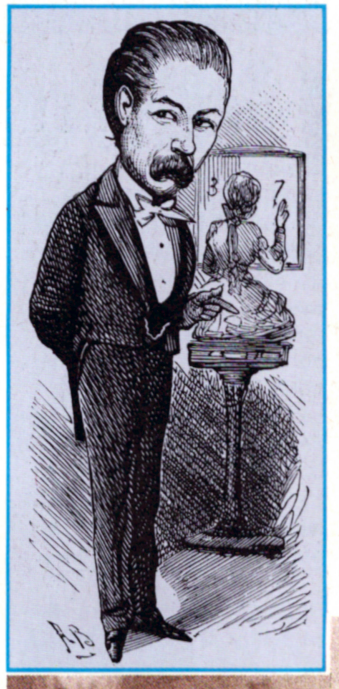
Conan Doyle himself was given one or two intimations of Houdini's psychic powers, much to the magician's embarrassment. Following a demonstration of automatic writing, Houdini offered to try his hand at it. He took up a pencil and, without conscious effort, wrote one word. 'Then he looked up at me, and I was amazed, for I saw in his eyes that look, impossible to imitate, which comes to the medium who is under the [psychic] influence.' Doyle looked at the paper: the word was 'Powell' – and Doyle's friend Ellis Powell had just died. 'Why, Houdini, Saul is among the prophets!' Doyle cried; 'You are a medium!' Houdini, disconcerted, muttered only that he knew somebody called Powell in Texas.

Then there was the celebrated occasion when Houdini gave what he claimed was a bogus seance for President Theodore Roosevelt on board ship. Roosevelt wrote down the question: 'Where was I last Christmas?': the answer was to be written by 'psychic' means on a slate. Houdini obtained the correct reply that the President had been in South America (a fact not generally known). At the time – as usual – Houdini declined to give an explanation, beyond insisting that it was a trick. But later, according to his biographer Harold Kellock, he did offer an explanation for it. He had, he said, collected the information in advance – not just for the President, but for other people he knew would be on board. It was his suggestion, Houdini asserted, that the 'seance' should be held; he had written the answers on prepared slates, and had merely substituted them for the slates upon which the sitters thought the 'spirits' were writing.

So far, so good; but even Conan Doyle – though his detective work at seances was notoriously poor – realised that one question remained unanswered: how did Houdini know in advance that the President was going to ask that particular question, so that he would be prepared with the answer?

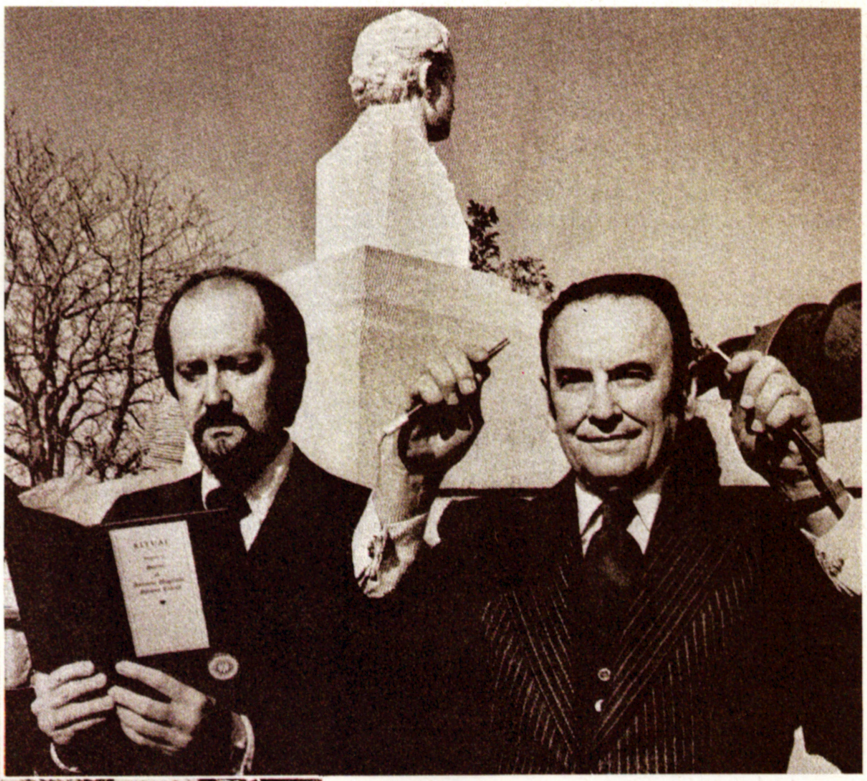
By themselves, Doyle's stories about Houdini's psychic powers are suggestive rather than convincing. Some simply indicate that Houdini was skilled at tricks that, though actually simple, would be regarded as 'miraculous' – until the explanation was divulged. Thus, Houdini was not impressed when he heard about the game that Gilbert Murray, Regius professor of Greek at Oxford University and president of the League of Nations Union, used to play with his family and friends. Murray would go out of the room while they chose a subject, and then come back and tell them what they had chosen. His record was astonishing: over a period of years one out of three of his guesses would be 'hits' and another third near-misses, though the subjects he was set ranged

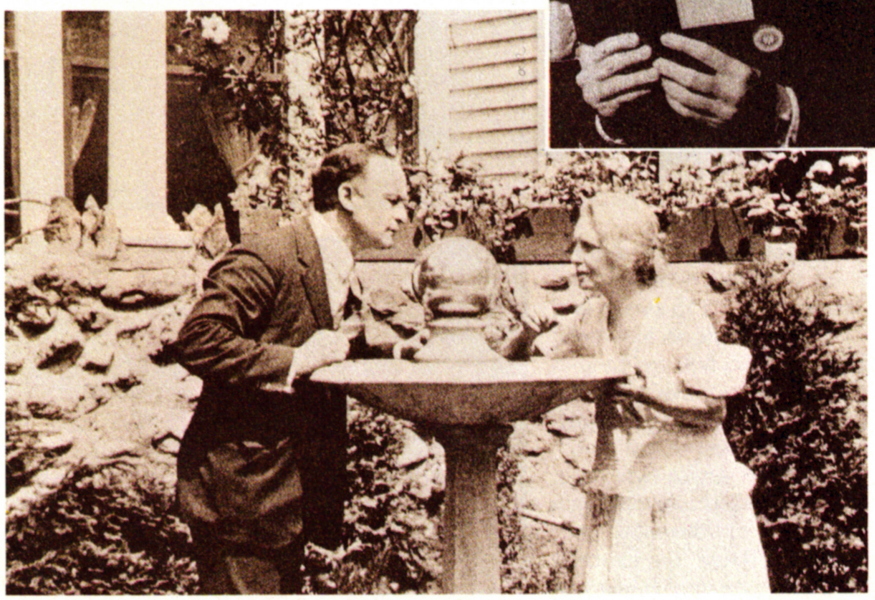
Even Houdini seemed at a loss for a rational explanation for some of his tricks, as when he rigged a 'psychic slate writing' seance for President Theodore Roosevelt (left). Houdini had prepared substitute slates carrying answers to any obvious questions but, when a totally unexpected question was put to him by the President, the slate still bore the correct answer. Other magicians parodied mediumship in their acts, including Ira Davenport (bottom, with Houdini) and Maskelyne (below) – the latter was, however, favourably impressed by the table-turning he had seen



from episodes in novels to events he had never heard of.

Houdini claimed he could do the same trick, and he invited a distinguished audience – the publisher Ralph Pulitzer, financier Bernard Baruch and newspaperman Walter Lippmann, among others – to test him. While they chose a subject in one room of Houdini's New York home, Houdini was shut up in a crate in a room two floors above, and the door guarded. Yet he, too, got three out of four of the subjects more or less right. This prompted Doyle to cite it as one of many indications that 'Houdini possessed that psychic sensibility which is the ground work of mediumship.' Not so: Houdini had instructed his brother always to repeat whatever subject was chosen, aloud – and the room was 'bugged'. He had simply listened in his upstairs confinement. But 'bugging' was new; so new, in fact, that even five years later it had not crossed Doyle's mind as a possible explanation for Houdini's 'hits'.





Top: American magicians ritually break a wand over Houdini's grave in 1979 to symbolise the end of his powers – but to many a more fitting image is that of Houdini flirting with the unknown, looking into the depths of a crystal ball in the company of a psychic, Anna Eva Fay (above)

Yet some of the evidence that Houdini may have had psychic powers comes from sceptics. In *Houdini: the untold story* (1969) Milbourne Christopher, himself a magician and one of the founder members of the notoriously sceptical Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims for the Paranormal (CSICOP), described an incident that took place during Houdini's tour of Britain in 1920, with Houdini in the unaccustomed role of the sorcerer's apprentice.

One of Houdini's first British engagements was at the Empire Theatre in Edinburgh. It was here, in the 1900s, that his old friend 'the Great Lafayette' had been burned to death, shortly after his beloved dog, which had been a gift from Houdini, died. Houdini and his wife Bess went to visit the cemetery where Lafayette and the dog were buried, taking pots of flowers to put on the grave; by Houdini's own account, he was prompted to say 'Lafayette: give us a sign you are here!'

Apparently, Lafayette did just that. According to Christopher, the pots overturned, 'as if a spirit hand swept them to the ground'; and when Houdini set them upright, they crashed again. 'This time they fell with such force that the pots broke,' Houdini wrote; 'it was all very strange.' However, he recovered himself, attributing the phenomenon to the high wind at the time; a photograph of the Houdinis at the graveside clearly shows Bess's coat being tugged open by the wind.

Joseph Rinn, too, who collaborated with Houdini in his campaign against mediums in the 1920s, was to recall in his *Sixty years of psychical research* (1954) that Houdini had described one occasion in his career when he was – apparently – beaten by a European locksmith, who had trapped him in a device that he was unable to open. But, just as he despaired, 'the lock, without any help from me, sprung open.'

But if Houdini had so many intimations of his psychic powers – no matter how vague – why would he so vehemently have denounced those mediums who were trying to demonstrate them?

Partly it was for the reason he himself advanced: he loathed the way in which bogus mediums had been exploiting grief by purporting to provide communication from dead loved ones. But there was, perhaps, a simpler reason. To admit to having psychic powers – especially at that time – would have destroyed his chance of achieving his life's ambition: to become recognised as the greatest magician the world had ever known. Yet he achieved that ambition. Although he died in 1926, Houdini is a household word; he is still the greatest escapologist of them all.

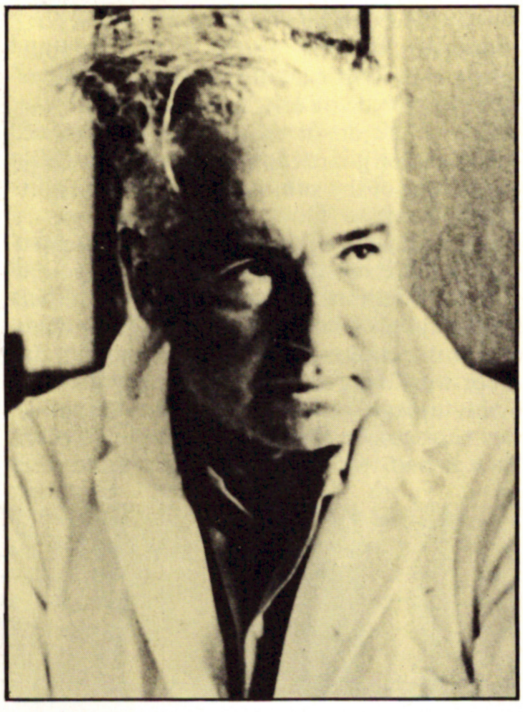
Further reading

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The edge of the unknown*, John Murray 1930

Harry Houdini, *A magician among the spirits*, Harper (New York) 1924

The cosmic orgasm

Wilhelm Reich believed that the secret of physical and mental health was contained in the orgasm, and that sexual energy was tangible and could be harnessed to rid the world of all ills. FRANCIS KING investigates



Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), whose bold theories about the importance of the orgasm in both individual and collective life outstripped even those of Sigmund Freud. Reich believed that orgasm – and only heterosexual orgasm – could, if uninhibited enough, relieve men and women of all tensions and establish a total inner harmony. But he went further, claiming to have created 'bions', substances halfway between dead and living tissue, which could become living – albeit primitive – matter

THE QUEST TO DISCOVER the secret of life, and identify some force that distinguishes living protoplasm from inanimate matter, has obsessed occultists, alchemists and scientists for centuries. Although in most cases the investigator has pursued knowledge for its own sake, in others he has tried to usurp the divine prerogative and actually create life from inorganic material. And occasionally he has claimed to have succeeded.

As late as the 1930s a London-based alchemist named Archibald Cockren (see page 1016) attempted to create life in the form of the 'alchemical tree': this was supposed to be a living mineral, described in the 16th century by Paracelsus as 'a wonderfull and pleasant shrub, which the Alchymists call their Golden hearb.' The poet C. R. Cammell said that he had seen this mineral 'hearb' in Cockren's laboratory and had watched it over a period of months grow to a considerable size.

The claim to have created life has not been confined to eccentric occultists. The late Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), a scientist with an impeccable academic background, asserted not only that he had created life but also that by doing so he had solved many mysteries of nature, from the causes of cancer to the significance of UFO sightings.

Reich was the son of prosperous Austrian-Jewish parents. After serving in the Austrian army during the First World War he studied medicine at Vienna University and qualified as a doctor in 1922. While still a medical student he studied the writings of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and other pioneer psychoanalysts, and became convinced of the central importance of sexuality in human life: on 1 March 1919 he wrote in his diary:

> . . . from my own experience, and from observation of myself and others, I have become convinced that sexuality is the centre around which revolves the whole of social life as well as the inner life of the individual.

In 1920 Reich was accepted as a member of Freud's Vienna Psychoanalytical Society; by 1922, when he became one of the co-founders of the Viennese Seminar for Psychoanalytic Therapy, he was regarded by the elders of the analytical movement as an authority on therapeutic techniques.

By 1927 Reich was drifting away from current Freudian orthodoxy. He was in fact developing a strand of early Freudian theory that Freud himself had neglected for over a

A waste of energy?

Reich's highly controversial claims – such as having created life from inorganic matter, the alchemists' obsession (below) – naturally gave his critics

Above: the hectic quest of the medieval alchemist for the secret of life – an actual chemical or physical ingredient that could, it was thought, eventually be isolated and used to create living tissue from dead or inorganic matter. Reich and his followers believed that he had succeeded in discovering 'radiating bions' – derived from sterilised sea sand – and that the radiations they gave off were the life-stuff of the Universe, which he called 'orgone'

plenty of ammunition. An arch-sceptic of all matters paranormal, John Sladek, certainly did not mince his words in the chapter on Reich in *The new apocrypha* (1974), particularly when describing Reich's 'disastrous ORANUR experiment'.

OR – Reichian shorthand for orgone radiation – was believed by his followers to be beneficial on a large scale. As his wife, Ilse Ollendorf Reich, explained: 'It was Reich's idea to help eradicate the terrible effects of the atom bomb through a three-fold attack: by using orgone energy to heal radiation sickness, to neutralize the effects of an atom bomb and . . . to immunize mankind against radiation.'

The ORANUR experiment consisted of exposing a large number of mice to radioactive material and then to beams of OR, which would, Reich and his research team were convinced, neutralize the harmful radioactivity. Very shortly however, as Sladek describes, 'his assistants had noticed Geiger counters running wild, but of course they put it down to excesses of orgone energy. Forty test animals died in one day, having all the symptoms of radiation poisoning. Then lab assistants began coming down with the same symptoms. . . .' Reich's wife was similarly affected – so badly that she had to undergo surgery. But even so, Reich – with amazing obtuseness – consistently missed the point.

quarter of a century; this concerned the *aktual* ('at the present time') neuroses.

In the formative period of psychoanalysis Freud had classified neuroses into two groups: the psychoneuroses were caused by incidents that had happened long ago, particularly in early childhood; the *aktual* neuroses were psychological illnesses supposedly caused by present-day disturbances of healthy sexuality, such as premature ejaculation, or obsessive masturbation. Freud concentrated all his attention on the psychoneuroses and, after about 1900, scarcely ever mentioned the *aktual* neuroses.

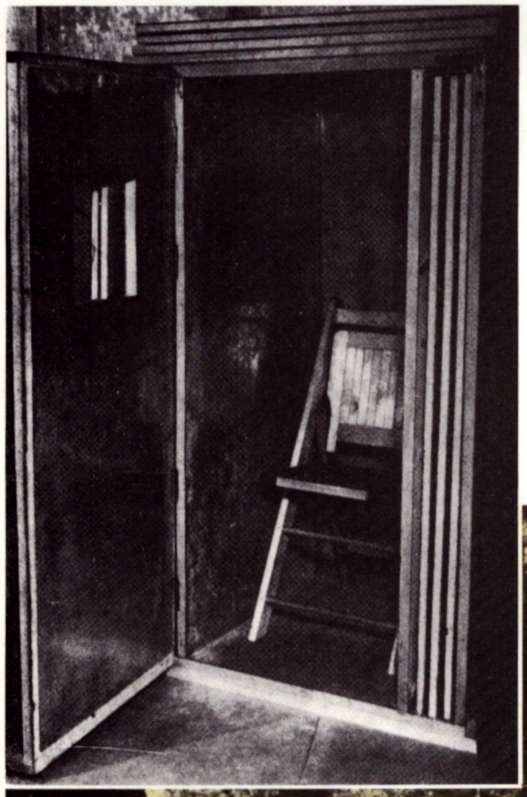
Reich concluded that Freud was mistaken, and that almost all illness, including schizophrenia and manic depression, resulted from the failure to achieve 'true orgasm', which he defined as 'the capacity for complete discharge of all dammed-up sexual excitation through involuntary pleasurable contractions of the body'. The object of psychoanalytical therapy, Reich argued, was to establish 'orgastic potency' and to enable the individual to achieve a sexual climax that would be long lasting, fully satisfying and unaccompanied by fantasies or fetishes. It would also be without subsequent feelings of guilt or inadequacy, and above all it would be the result of a heterosexual relationship.

Reich also believed that the failure of dammed-up sexual energy to find release in the convulsions of orgasm resulted in 'muscular armouring' – muscular tension and rigidity. This armouring reinforced the original disturbance, which in turn led to more tension and rigidity – a self-perpetuating

process of physical and mental degeneration.

Neither the traditional Freudian type of analysis (the unveiling of repressed memories) nor Reich's own practice, based on examining 'present day character', was adequate to cope with armouring. For this Reich developed a new technique, which involved character analysis, deep massage, breathing exercises and violent physical manipulation of the patient's body to break down tension and release blocked-up sexual energy. Reich called this process vegetotherapy, because he believed that the energies trapped by muscular armouring were stored in the vegetative (otherwise known as the autonomic, or involuntary) nervous system.

Reich was also interested in the nature of sexual energy. He believed it to be a specific force comparable to the forces of gravitation and electromagnetism, and that it could be accumulated in the same way that electricity is stored in a battery. To prove his point he embarked on a series of experiments to ascertain 'whether the sexual organs, in a state of excitation . . . show an increase in their bio-electric charge.' Volunteers were 'wired up' and the results of their sexual activity monitored: the results were spectacular. Sexual excitation, Reich reported, was accompanied by a significant increase in the bio-electrical charge of the genitals; anxiety, pain and guilt by a reduction. The orgasm was a biological thunderstorm.

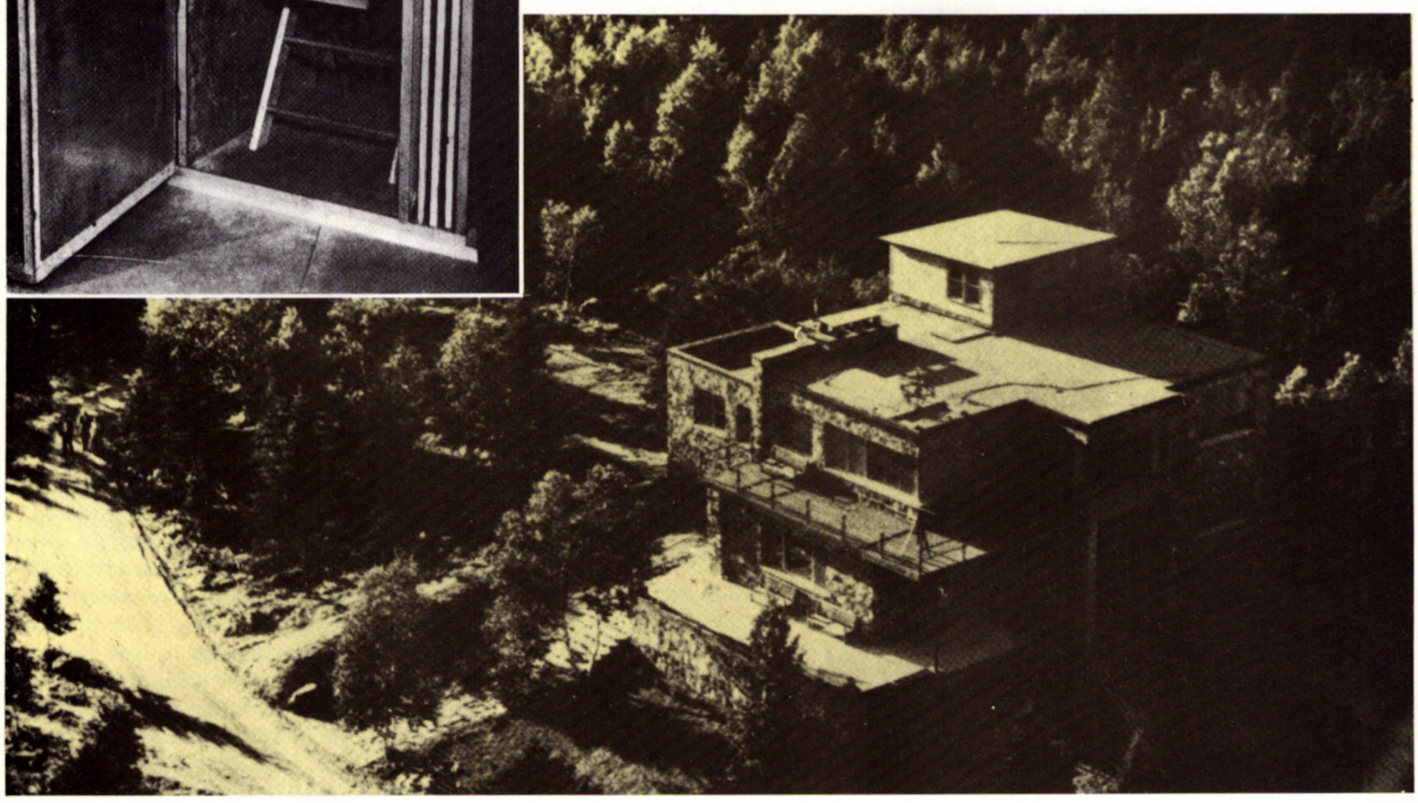


Below: the Orgone Energy Observatory at Orgonon, near Rangeley, Maine, USA. Reich and his supporters established this observatory in the hope that orgone energy could be detected and harnessed for the greater good of mankind. For a more detailed view of the effects of intensified orgone, the 'orgone energy accumulators' were built (left) which, although quaintly resembling privies, were believed to accumulate the orgone energy of anyone seated within. The energy thus collected and stored could, Reich believed, be used to treat any kind of human ailment

A matter of life?

In 1935 Reich (who was now living in Norway as a refugee from the Nazis) began a more ambitious series of biological experiments. He subsequently announced to his astonished scientific contemporaries that he had succeeded in producing from substances such as sterilised coal and soot what he termed 'bions'. These, he claimed, were energy vesicles (sacs) halfway between dead matter and living tissue, and were capable of developing into protozoa (single-cell organisms). One of Reich's assistants filmed these bions through a microscope, but biologists were not impressed. The 'bions', they argued, were no more than tiny particles of non-living matter and their movements were the result of ordinary physical phenomena.

Undeterred by this criticism, Reich continued with his experiments. He concentrated his attention on a 'radiating bion' that he believed he had derived from sterilised sea sand; in 1939 he announced that the radiation given off by these 'sand-packet' bions (which he named *sapa*bions) was a hitherto unknown form of energy, the basic life-stuff

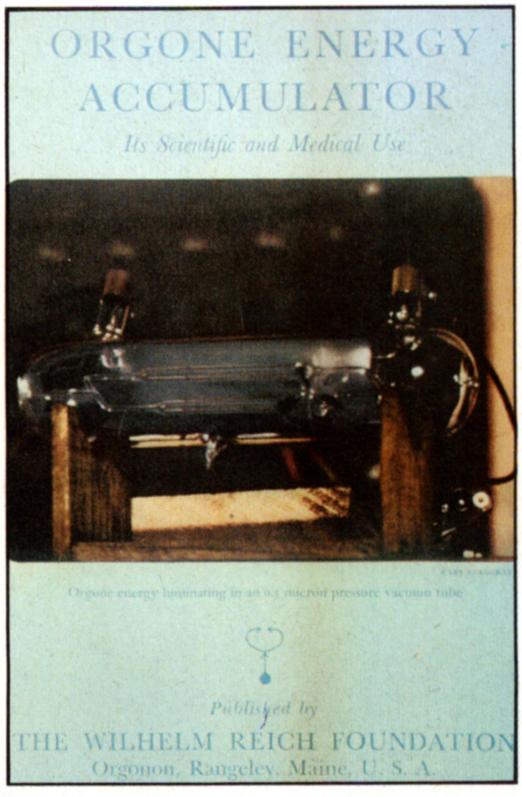


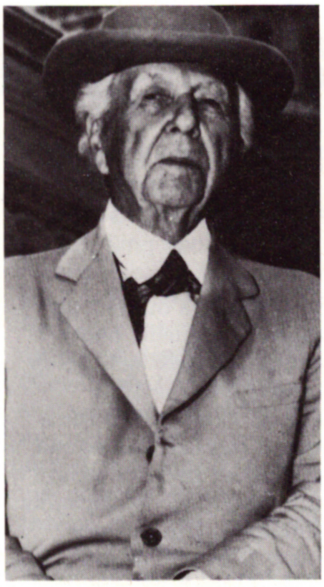
of the Universe. He called it 'orgone', and devoted the rest of his life to studying it.

In the same year that he claimed to have discovered orgone energy, Reich emigrated to the USA where he began to attract a small but enthusiastic following. He continued his research on orgone, which he maintained was identical with both the *vis animalis* ('animal force') of the ancient alchemists and the 'life force' – a mysterious quality distinguishing living from dead matter postulated by the philosopher Henri Bergson. Orgone was no metaphysical abstraction. It could not only be measured with an 'orgone energy field meter' (a modified electroscope of Reich's own devising) but could be seen by the naked eye in 'the blue coloration of sexually excited frogs' and collected and stored in an 'orgone energy accumulator', another Reichian invention. These accumulators, said Reich, could be used in the treatment of every human ailment from depression to cancer.

Orgone energy accumulators were (and are) boxes made of alternate layers of inorganic and organic material (usually metal and wood). The more layers there were, the more powerful the accumulator would be. Those intended for human use were large enough for the patient to sit inside; in appearance they strongly resembled an old-fashioned privy.

Between 1939 and 1957 Reich published many articles and books making increasingly astounding claims for orgone. Originally he had regarded it as an energy exclusive to living organisms, but by 1951 he was asserting that it was the original building-matter of creation, the primal 'stuff' from which reality had evolved, and that physical matter was the offspring of the superimposition (the 'cosmic orgasm') of two streams of orgone. Everything from radio interference and the blueness of the sky (orgone was coloured blue) to hurricane formation and the force of gravity was a manifestation of orgone. The only exception was atomic radiation, which Reich saw as the antithesis of the life energy – a Satan to the Jehovah of orgone.





As Reich grew older, his ideas about orgone grew stranger. He published an increasing number of pamphlets (below left) on how to trap and utilise this mysterious but basic energy, but also attracted bizarre followers, such as the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (above) who defended his hero through Reich's last, harrowing trial – at which he was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment for selling his accumulators, deemed by a Federal court to be fakes. Another of Reich's faithful if somewhat flamboyant disciples was the beat poet Allen Ginsberg (above right, seen tangling with the British police). Ginsberg adapted Reich's theories to advocate collecting orgone through the use of hard drugs and homosexual practices – something of which Reich would never have approved

All this was strange enough, but even odder were Reich's writings on the subject of UFOs. Earth, Reich asserted, was the centre of an intergalactic conflict, and UFOs were the warships of the antagonists. One side was utterly evil, and extracted orgone from the Earth and its atmosphere with the intention of reducing the planet to a radioactive cinder; their opponents were allies of humanity and of Reich, and dedicated to replacing the stolen orgone.

Reich died in prison in 1957. He had been sentenced for defying a Federal injunction banning the sale of his accumulators on the grounds that they were fraudulent. For a time it seemed that Reich and his theories would quickly be forgotten. Some of his followers became even odder than their teacher: one group spent much time sitting in semi-darkness, clad in blue robes (in honour of orgone), attempting to communicate with their dead master through an ouija board. Other alleged Reichian groups, closely associated with the writers Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, combined Reichian theories with the advocacy of homosexuality and the use of psychedelic drugs.

However, some of Reich's writings have attracted more serious study, and a number of therapists influenced by his ideas now practise in London and other major cities. But no one has yet attempted to repeat his laboratory work, with the object of establishing how far his orgone experiments had any validity. Perhaps some day this will be done: it is just possible Reich made some discoveries of genuine importance.

Further reading

Francis King, *Sexuality, magic and perversion*, Spearman 1971
Wilhelm Reich, *The sexual revolution*, Vision Press 1952
Wilhelm Reich, *Selected writings*, Vision Press 1958

Unravelling Rennes

The unravelling of the mystery that leads from Rennes-le-Château to the marriage of Christ is a gripping story. BRIAN INNES analyses its weaknesses – and adduces some evidence that appears to substantiate the tale

Left: the grave of François-Bérenger Saunière, parish priest of Rennes-le-Château at the end of the 19th century. After finding some ancient manuscripts, so the story goes, Saunière came into possession of vast sums of money – one estimate puts it at over a million gold francs – which he used in lavish entertainment, the sumptuous redecoration of the church, and the building of the ostentatiously magnificent Villa Bethania (below and right). But in fact there is no reliable evidence that Saunière ever had such a large sum of money at his disposal

WHAT DO WE REALLY KNOW about the mystery of Rennes-le-Château and the village's 19th-century curé, Bérenger Saunière? The story – put very briefly – is this. François-Bérenger Saunière, eldest son of Joseph Saunière, mayor of the tiny village of Montazels, was born on 11 April 1852. On 1 June 1885, he became the priest of the church of Sainte-Madeleine in Rennes-le-Château, and remained there for the rest of his life. In 1892, making use of a small legacy available for the upkeep of his church, he replaced the ancient altar, and it is said that he found, in a hollow pillar that supported the altar, some parchment manuscripts. He also dug up a slab of stone that was found to be carved with a scene that could have been as much as a thousand years old, perhaps older still.

Rumour begins to creep in. All we know for certain is that Saunière contrived to have the church repaired and decorated in a crude style that incorporates a number of puzzling elements. He had a house built for himself next to the church, the Villa Bethania, which is ostentatiously finer than any other in the village; and a garden with a conservatory; and a two-storey tower, the Tour Magdala, that rises on the highest point of the hill.

There is no doubt about this: the restoration of the church, the buildings that Saunière raised, are there for all to see. But should we – could we – believe all those tales of the curé's immense wealth, and of the rich guests that he entertained so lavishly in his house?

For a great deal of our information we seem to be dependent only upon the writings of Gérard de Sède. It is de Sède who tells us that Saunière's constructions at Rennes-le-Château, and the lavish entertainment that he provided for his guests, represent an expenditure of over one million *francs d'or*. But when one looks at what has survived, and attempts to estimate what it might have cost in 1900, it is difficult to value it at one fiftieth of this amount. It is de Sède who tells us how extraordinary the interior decoration of the church is; but this decoration is chiefly made up of plaster statues and reliefs supplied by the firm of Ané, of Letouzey, which also supplied such material to many other churches at the turn of the century.

It is de Sède who first draws our attention to the fact that drawings of the two stones

that Saunière removed have been reproduced in publications. The first, the gravestone of Marie de Negri d'Ables, wife of Francis d'Hautpoul de Blanchefort, is said still to exist: Philippe de Chérisey, in a letter to the editors of the French edition of *The Unexplained*, writes:

> This slab was removed from the cemetery in the sight and knowledge of the inhabitants of Rennes, and is now at Carcassonne in the collection of an amateur antiquary, who is not very disposed to exhibit it. . . .

What is reputed to be the second slab still covers a communal grave in Rennes cemetery, though it has been broken into several pieces by treasure seekers. The alleged inscription appears in Eugene Stublein's *Pierres gravées du Languedoc*, but apparently only in the 1962 reprint of what is said to be the 1884 edition (see page 2494). Infra-red photographs exist that are claimed to have revealed the obliterated inscription, but these appear to be crude forgeries.

As for the documents Saunière is supposed to have discovered in the pillar, two of which de Sède reproduces, Philippe de Chérisey writes:

> (1) There were three parchments, not four. (2) These parchments were genealogies, not 'faked' gospels. (3) The gospels are of recent manufacture, photocopies of two sheets of paper composed a little before the publication of Gérard de Sède's book, and designed to produce an effect upon that author that has exceeded the wildest expectations. (4) The text *Jesu medela vulnerum* inscribed by Saunière on a plaque situated at the foot of the altar in his church has been put to good use by the author of these pseudo-parchments with the intention of giving them an air of authenticity.

Yet de Chérisey is reported to be the good friend of Pierre Plantard, who seems to have given de Sède assistance in the preparation of his original book.

So where did Saunière come by the money to pay for the works he carried out in Rennes-le-Château? On 23 May 1910 he was found guilty by his bishop of trafficking in masses, and was forbidden to continue his priestly duties – a ban that was lifted only in October 1915. The point is rightly made that no traffic in masses could possibly have resulted in a million gold francs – but then, we do not actually have any evidence that Saunière ever had a sum of money anything like this to dispose of.

Bottom right: Isabel of Angoulême, wife of King John (below), who ruled England between 1199 and 1216. Isabel was eleventh in descent from one Theodoric, who ruled the Razès region of southern France from 721 to 738. King Pepin III of France (died 768) apparently granted the Jewish colony of Narbonne the right to be ruled by a Jewish king. A Babylonian Jew named Makhir, who claimed direct descent from the great Jewish King David (bottom), was selected as regent; on arriving in France, however, he assumed the name Theodoric. By this complex route the royal family of England could claim descent from King David

The mystery of the tomb

The story of the tomb at Les Pontils, in the parish of Arques, which so closely resembles that in Poussin's painting *The shepherds of Arcadia* (see page 230), is given in detail by Franck Marie, who claims to have researched the area more thoroughly than any other writer. A certain Louis Galibert, with his wife Elizabeth, built a small factory to make braids and army boots at Les Pontils in 1880. His grandson erected the tomb in 1903, and his grandmother was buried there the following year. In December 1921 the Galibert family, which had removed to Limoux, built a communal tomb in the cemetery there; the stone dressings were taken from the tomb at Les Pontils, together with the remains of Elizabeth Galibert.

The property at Les Pontils was bought by a Mrs Rivera, from the USA. Her 52-year-old son Lawrence, an eccentric character who raised goats and rabbits, clad the

remains of the tomb in cement to resemble that in Poussin's painting. In 1954, Lawrence Rivera died penniless in Carcassonne.

Still the doubt remains. The stories of a hidden treasure at Rennes-le-Château are long established, and the local rumours have attached themselves to Bérenger Saunière. It would be encouraging if it were possible to discover more about him, but so many of the details that have appeared in the hundreds of writings that have appeared since 1965 can be traced no further back than Gérard de Sède; and much of the rest is attributable to the 'Prieuré documents' that have been deposited in the Bibliothèque Nationale since 1956, and in which the hand of Pierre Plantard can be so clearly seen.

And yet, and yet: little pieces of evidence still emerge that suggest there is something in history on which the whole frail structure of the theory put forward by Henry Lincoln, Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh could find a firmer foundation. Shortly after the publication of the first series of articles about Rennes in *The Unexplained*, a correspondent sent in some information that had come unexpectedly to him in the post. There was an extract from *Pedigree and progress*, by Sir Anthony Wagner, formerly Garter King of Arms, and a genealogy by G. M. Moriarty from a work about the Plantagenet family.

Left: an illustration from the 14th century *Lestoire del Saint Graal*, or 'History of the Holy Grail,' in which Galahad is crowned by the son of Joseph of Arimathea. The theory that the Grail legend is linked with the countryside surrounding Rennes-le-Château is supported by the curious coincidence of a local place name. One of the romances of the Holy Grail tells how Sir Gawain shelters in the *Atre Perileus*, the Chapel Perilous. And close to the tiny village of Opoul, near Rennes, are the ruins of Château Perilos (below)

It appears that toward the end of the eighth century the Jewish colony at Narbonne was granted the right, by Pepin III (the father of Charlemagne and deposer of the Merovingian king Childeric III), to be governed by a Jewish king. A suitable candidate was selected in Babylonia by the Caliph Harun-al-Rashid; his name was Makhir, but it appears that on arriving in France he took the name of Theodoric. His son was St William, Marquess of Septimania, Count of Razès, known as 'Count Nez', who became a Benedictine monk and founded the monastery of Gellone. Makhir claimed direct descent from the House of David, and from him Isabel of Angoulême, wife of King John of England, was eleventh in descent – so that the royal family of England can perhaps claim King David as one of their ancestors!

So there may be a Jewish connection: a prince of the House of David (as Christ himself was said to be) who becomes the ancestor of the House of Plantagenet, with which the name of Plantard may be associated.

There are other strange hints. More than one of the romances of the Holy Grail tells how Sir Gawain is overtaken by a terrible storm, and takes refuge in the *Atre Perileus*, the Chapel Perilous. Some 30 miles (50 kilometres) across the hills from Rennes-le-Château is the tiny village of Opoul, almost certainly the lands from which Francis d'Hautpoul derived his name. Take a narrow winding road that climbs among the crags behind the village, and you will come to an ancient chapel, above which loom the gaunt ruins of – Château Perilos. Perhaps there is something in the theory that links the development of the Grail legend – and the bizarre mystery with which it is associated – with the country around Rennes.

It is such straws in the wind that continue to persuade one not to dismiss the whole story of Rennes-le-Château, the descendants of Christ, the Merovingian dynasty and the Prieuré de Sion as nothing more than an elaborate hoax. Beyond those suspect documents in the Bibliothèque Nationale, there is no evidence whatsoever that the Merovingian bloodline survived the murder of Dagobert, or that the Prieuré de Sion continued to exist, in any form whatsoever, between the beginning of the 14th century and the year 1956. If it were not for that figure of a demon supporting the holy-water stoup in the church of Sainte-Madeleine, and the Tour Magdala brooding over the Razès countryside, it would be hard to believe in Bérenger Saunière himself.

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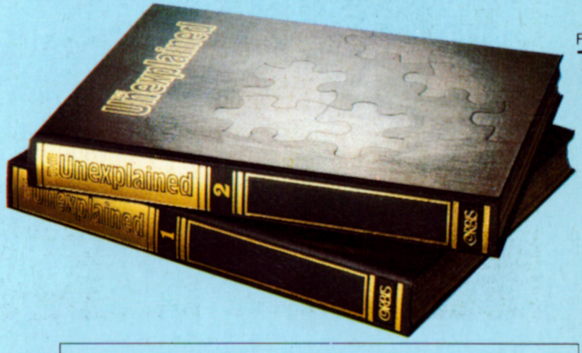

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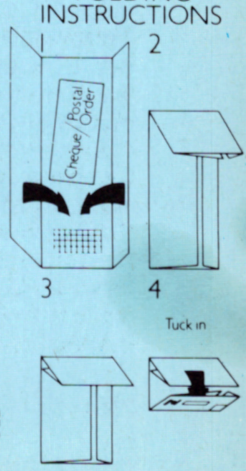

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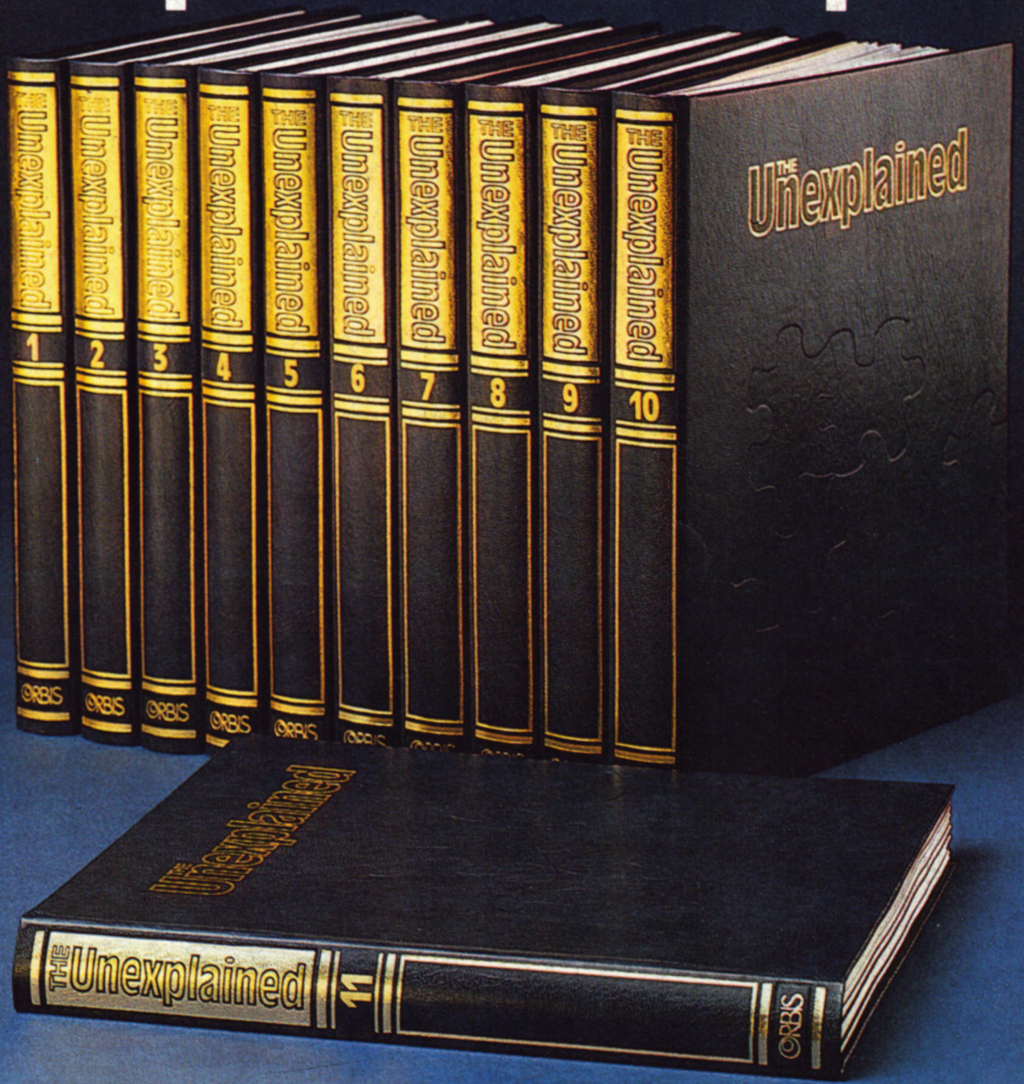

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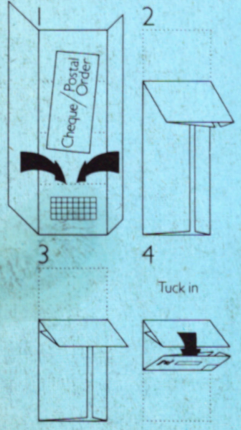

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